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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000560

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DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ELAB](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [VE](#)  
SUBJECT: POOR TURNOUT FOR VENEZUELAN LABOR DAY MARCHES;  
POLICE CRACK DOWN ON OPPOSITION MARCH

CARACAS 00000560 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,  
FOR REASON 1.4(D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Government supporters and the opposition organizers organized competing May 1 Labor Day marches in Caracas. Both sides attracted only modest turn-outs at the start of a long weekend when Venezuelans traditionally head to the beach. Members of the Caracas metropolitan police and National Guard dispersed the opposition crowd with tear gas and rubber bullets. President Chavez addressed pro-government union members near the Miraflores Presidential Palace later the same day. During his nationally televised speech, Chavez rebuffed USG criticism that Venezuelan is not cooperating against terrorism and exhorted the United States to lift all trade restrictions on Cuba. The relatively poor showing by both government supporters and the opposition suggests growing political apathy among Venezuelans. End Summary.

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Government Breaks Up Opposition March  
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¶2. (SBU) Both opposition and Chavista parties and unions held marches in Caracas, and to a lesser extent in other parts of Venezuela, to commemorate the May 1 Labor Day holiday. Although prominent figures participated in both marches, neither side succeeded in generating large crowds, like they did in the run-up to the February 15 referendum on term limits. Opposition marchers planned to reach the National Assembly, but before they reached their speakers' podium positioned in the vicinity, members of the Caracas metropolitan police and National Guard marched headlong toward the crowd dispersing it with tear gas and rubber bullets.

¶3. (SBU) Opposition leaders insist that they were trying to reach Carabobo Park, the farthest point reportedly authorized by the Ministry of the Interior. Pro-government mayor of the Libertador borough of Caracas Jorge Rodriguez did not grant the opposition marchers permission to reach the National Assembly. Police officials blamed several purported students for initiating the confrontation by allegedly trying to break through police barricades. After police used tear gas in Libertador, local residents in area apartment buildings spontaneously began banging pots and pans from their windows and balconies to protest the police action against the demonstrators, a fair number of whom were women and children.

¶4. (SBU) According to the local pro-opposition press, three people were arrested on May 1 during the Caracas

demonstrations, one of whom claimed to be a Chavez sympathizer. Two were charged with disturbing the peace and the other was arrested for carrying an illegal firearm. As of May 4, the three had been released from jail. There were no reported incidents of serious injuries or deaths during the marches, although some opposition marchers received treatment for respiratory problems related to the tear gas.

15. (SBU) The National Press Workers' Union (SNTP) on May 3 criticized the Venezuelan government's breaking up of the opposition march as "a cowardly and wily ambush against defenseless people" who were not given a means of escape from the tear gas and rubber bullets. SNTP Secretary General Gregoria Salazar claimed he could not remember another incident in recent history of the police acting with "such savagery" against union marches. The state-owned Bolivarian News Agency (ABN) reported May 1 that the opposition's march transpired "without discourse, without leaders, and with violence."

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Chavez Promotes Socialist Agenda  
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16. (SBU) Pro-government union members rallied May 1 at three separate points in Caracas and marched close to the Miraflores presidential palace without incident. President Chavez addressed the modest crowd late in the afternoon. The GBRV required all television and radio networks to carry his speech ("en cadena"). Chavez harshly criticized the opposition marchers, calling them "counterrevolutionaries," "squalid ones," and "conspirators." The Venezuelan president reiterated that effective May 1 Venezuela's minimum wage would increase by 10 percent and would be increased another 10 percent in September. Inflation, however, is likely to

CARACAS 00000560 002.2 OF 002

exceed 30 percent in 2009. One year earlier, Chavez decreed a 30 percent jump in the minimum wage.

17. (SBU) Chavez also exhorted the United States to lift trade restrictions on Cuba, contending that the embargo will be "a stick by which to measure Obama's willingness to effect change." He added that "if President Obama does not dismantle the savage embargo...everything is a lie, everything would be a great farse." Chavez then welcomed what he claimed was a delegation of American workers who were attending the rally, noting that "the Venezuelan people are brothers to all peoples in the world, including of course the American people." The Venezuelan president then went on to criticize the recently released State Department Terrorism Report as "a new aggression from the North American empire" for its description of poor Venezuelan border controls. Chavez said that it was the United States who has engaged in terrorism over the past century and that "we do not deal in speeches or in smiles, but in realities. As such, we categorically reject this disgraceful (attack) by Obama's government against Venezuela."

18. (SBU) Photos were aired late in the day on May 1 allegedly showing opposition Mayor of Greater Caracas Antonio Ledezma at the airport on Margarita Island on his way to a beach vacation. The photos -- only of Ledezma from behind -- were taken by an anonymous observer's cell phone and shown on the state-owned Venezolana TV (VTV) program "Dando y Dando." Pro-government Aporrea.org media outlet ridiculed the opposition for its poor showing at the march and added, "some web sites expressed concern for Ledezma for apparently inhaling a bit of tear gas, but these photos reveal that he is in very good health." Based on what Ledezma was wearing earlier in the day at the march, the photos are almost certainly of him.

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COMMENT  
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¶9. (C) May 1 was an important test of the status of the beleaguered opposition, which in the run-up to the protests sought to tie their cause to a day when workers' unions traditionally march. The mass exodus of Venezuelans from Caracas to the beach, however, indicates that just as during the Christmas holidays prior to the February 15 referendum on term limits, there was more general interest in enjoying time off than making a strong political showing. Although the opposition missed an opportunity to revive its reputation, the pro-government march was poorly attended as well. This is likely to prove a temporary lull in political confrontations, however, as President Chavez continues to accelerate and radicalize his Bolivarian revolution.

¶10. (C) Chavez's criticism of the United States following the latest annual report published by the State Department continues his tendency of publicly lashing out against perceived US criticism, even when the substance of the criticism is nothing new or out of the ordinary. This may represent some effort by the Venezuelan President to counter disapproval among his militant base of supporters regarding Chavez's photo op and handshake with President Obama at the Summit of the Americas in April. Chavez's comments could portend a continuing Venezuelan government effort to paint the new Obama administration as a continuation of US "imperialism."

CAULFIELD